

Riot. Strike. Riot

The New Era of Uprisings

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INTRODUCTION

A Theory of Riot

Riots are coming, they are already here, more are on the way, no one doubts it. They deserve an adequate theory.

A theory of riot is a theory of crisis. This is true at a vernacular and local level, in moments of shattered glass and fire, wherein riot is taken to be the irruption of a desperate situation, immiseration at its limit, the crisis of a given community or city, of a few hours or days. However, riot can only be grasped as having an internal and structural significance, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon, insofar as we can discover the historical motion that provides its form and substance. We must then move to further levels, where the gathering instances of riot are inextricable from ongoing and systemic capitalist crisis. Moreover, the riot as a particular form of struggle illuminates the character of crisis, makes it newly thinkable, and provides a prospect from which to view its unfolding.

The first relation between riot and crisis is that of surplus. This seems already a paradox, as both crisis and riot are commonly understood to arise from dearth, shortfall, deprivation. At the same time, riot is itself the experience of surplus. Surplus danger, surplus information, surplus military gear. Surplus emotion. Indeed, riots were once known as “emotions,” a history still visible in the French word: *émeute*. The crucial surplus in the moment of riot is simply that of participants, of population. The moment when the

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partisans of riot exceed the police capacity for management, when the cops make their first retreat, is the moment when the riot becomes fully itself, slides loose from the grim continuity of daily life. The ceaseless social regulation that had seemed ideological and ambient and abstract is in this moment of surplus disclosed as a practical matter, open to social contest.

All these surpluses correspond to larger social transformations from which these experiences of affective and practical surplus are inextricable. These transformations are the material restructurings that respond to and constitute capitalist crisis, and which feature surpluses of both capital and population as core features. And it is these that propose riot as a necessary form of struggle.

“Any population has a limited repertoire of collective action,” notes Charles Tilly, great historian of these matters. Writing in 1983, he takes the measure of a singular historical transformation, an oceanic shift whose tides spread late and soon across the industrializing world:

Some time in the nineteenth century, the people of most western countries shed the collective-action repertoire they had been using for two centuries or so, and adopted the repertoire they still use today.¹

The shift in question was that from riot to strike. Since the passage marked by Tilly, both tactics have existed within the repertoire; the question concerns which predominates, providing the primary orientation in the ceaseless war for survival and emancipation. The sense of the riot’s receding character within this telling has been a commonplace. The

¹ Charles Tilly, “Speaking Your Mind Without Elections, Surveys, or Social Movements,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 4, Winter 1983, 464.

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opening sentence of the authoritative 1996 volume *Rioting in America* informs us, “Rioting is part of the American past.”² But the past is never dead. It’s not even past.

In truth, another transformation was already in flight: since the sixties or seventies, the great historical shift has reversed itself. As the overdeveloped nations have entered into sustained, if uneven, crisis, the riot has returned as the leading tactic in the repertoire of collective action. This is true both in the popular imaginary and the realm of data (insofar as such matters give of statistical comparison). Regardless of perspective, riots have achieved an intransigent social centrality. Labor struggles have in the main been diminished to ragged defensive actions, while the riot features increasingly as the central figure of political antagonism, a specter leaping from insurrectionary debates to anxious governmental studies to glossy magazine covers. The names have become ordinal points of our time. The new era of riots has roots in Watts, Newark, Detroit; it passes through Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Los Angeles in 1992, arriving in the global present of São Paulo, Gezi Park, San Lázaro. The protorevolutionary riot of Tahrir Square, the nearly permanent riot of Exarcheia, the reactionary turn of Euromaidan. In the twilit core: Clichy-sous-Bois, Tottenham, Oakland, Ferguson, Baltimore. Too many to count.

Theory is immanent to struggle; often enough it must hurry to catch up to a reality that lurches ahead. A theory of the present will arise from its lived confrontations, rather than arriving on the scene laden with backdated homilies and prescriptions regarding how the war against state and capital ought be waged, programs we are told once worked and might now be refurbished and imposed once again

² Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, 1.

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on our quite distinct moment. The subjunctive is a lovely mood, but it is not the mood of historical materialism.

Here we reach a sort of crossroad. Put in the most schematic terms, the association of Marx's analytic framework with a Leninist account of political strategy—one centered around proletarian organization toward the revolutionary party and the seizure both of state and production—is profoundly sedimented. The riot has no place in this conceptual landscape. Often enough riot is understood to have no politics at all, a spasmodic irruption to be read symptomatically and perhaps granted a paternalistic dollop of sympathy. Those who have accorded the riot the potential for an insurrectionary opening onto a social rupture come generally from intellectual and political traditions indifferent or even antithetical to the command of state and economy, most famously (but not exclusively) those of some strands of anarchism.³

This expresses a subterranean linking of communism, by skeptics as much as adherents, with “organization” as such, and further with a left party of order, with a scientific sense of history's progress, with modernity through which we must pass in all its machined barbarity. Contrarily, the riot, as is broadly agreed even among its partisans, is a great disorder.

The opposition of strike and riot thus comes to stand, via veiled syllogism, for the opposition of Marxism *tout court* to other intellectual and political trajectories, generally those that are antidialectical if not directly anticommunist traditions. Most if not all sides have taken part in this apportioning. There has been no shortage of books left and

3 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2009, and its follow-up *To Our Friends*, trans. Semiotext(e), Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2015, are the most incisive versions.

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right that inform us, in tonalities now melancholy, now celebratory, that the waning of the labor movement and of the revolutionary class-mass party sequence, or the alleged transcendence of any labor theory of value, means that we may finally leave Marx's analysis and his categories to the twentieth century, if not the nineteenth. You will be familiar with the narration. The home counties of capitalism no longer feature an industrial working class of rising power or magnitude such that it can stand as a fraction for the exploited classes in general, much less lay hands on the levers of production. Moreover, the original focus on the English factory worker, and the accounting of such labor as peculiarly productive of value and thus closer to the heart of capital, has inevitably figured the subject of politics as white and male. Given the globalization of capital, its leap into all corners of social existence, and the vital developments of anticolonial politics (to shorthand a series of crucial and complex interventions), a new revolutionary subject will be needed, and a new revolutionary unfolding.

This is surely caricature. For all that, such suggestions are in many regards instructive if not simply true. This poses not a refutation of historical materialism but a set of problems for it. The waning of the traditional labor movements in the west and the intensification of a more thoroughgoing dispossession augur the end neither of potentially revolutionary anticapitalist antagonism nor of historical materialism's analytical force. Moreover, we will still require the latter to grasp the former.

After all, historical materialism is a theory of transformation if it is anything at all. This is not to say that every turn on the historical stage ought be affirmed. But a Marxism that can understand the tendency of reality only as error is no Marxism at all. The meaning of the riot has changed dramatically. It will not be understood without

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naming the determinations and forces according to which it takes on its new role, and by which it is driven forward irresistibly into the future, even as it looks backward on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This then is the most basic necessity: a *properly materialist theorization of the riot*. Riot for communists, let's say.

It is not clear that such a volume exists. Perhaps the closest approach is Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. "I, too, am a Marxist—naively, completely and so naturally there is no need to reiterate it," he insists, reiterating it in multiple while noting that he is

well aware of the problems that have been resolved, and which it is pointless to start reinvestigating; and of the problems that remain outstanding, and which require of us radical rectification and strenuous invention. Any living knowledge is made up of problems, which have been or must be constructed or reconstructed, not of repetitive descriptions.⁴

Having offered this promissory note, he does not thenceforth wrestle greatly with the problematics of capital, nor make much use of the categories bequeathed us by the critique of political economy. We are left with "the Idea" playing the role vacated by the party, providing a coordination of revolutionary spirit that proceeds at some distance from the dialectical developments of social forces.

Badiou orders his book as a taxonomy of riots organized around the Arab Spring. This is one among the overlapping generic approaches to such studies, dividing up riots according to political status, to occasion or proximate

⁴ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliot, New York: Verso, 2012, 8.

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cause, to coherence of participants. Another is the sociological study of rioters and their immediate conditions, and its close cousin the (generally first-person) phenomenology. Then there are the case studies of famous riots, alongside less glamorous surveys and atlases. Whatever its lacunae, the library of riot is dark and deep; only a fraction can be touched upon herein. This book has other promises to keep. It draws as well on Marx's value theory and the theory of crisis from which it cannot be disentangled, accounts of how urban cores hollow out, how entire sectors of the economy rise and fall, and how the capitalist world-system is ordered and disordered; the tradition of world-systems analysis provides a framework of both global breadth and *longue durée* within which to think the localized event of the riot.

There are limits to this extension, necessarily. It is evident that riots in India and China, to choose only two contemporary examples, have their own distinct characteristics (and their own developing scholarship). My claims mostly concern the early industrializing and now deindustrializing nations of the west. These places do not have a privileged claim on riots; they are, rather, the terrain in which a particular logic becomes visible, a logic of both riot and of capital in its catastrophic autumn. The claims are, I hope, somewhat portable for all that, embedded in political-economic changes that are themselves bound to travel.

Moreover, just as the new era of riots expresses capital's global transformations and thus bears capital's objective conditions, it becomes an occasion to peer more deeply into those transformations. If this book offers any novelities, they are these. First, clarified definitions of *riot* and *strike*, which suffer from more confusion than one might expect. Second, an explanation of why the riot has returned and why it takes the form it does in the present. And third,

once a logic of riot and its relation to transformations of capital has been derived, some forecasts about the future of struggle. A theory of the present, then. At a minimum, the theory should be able to explain why, following the failure to return an indictment against the police officer who murdered Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, there was a national wave of riots—and why, as if by a telepathy of the immiserated, the riots in city after city took the form of blocking the nearest available freeway.

Riot-Strike-Riot Prime

This book is arranged more or less chronologically, from the golden age of riot through the age of strikes and back again, with a particular focus on the transitional passages. However, it is not a chronicle. Rather, it takes the opportunity to develop a series of concepts and arguments about riot and political economy as it moves. It builds an explanatory model that can coordinate the basic facts of the present, such that they might testify a bit more eloquently. As it approaches the current era, the chapters inevitably get a bit more detailed. Nonetheless, the whole will necessarily be a simplification of reality's endless complexities; such are heuristic models. At least this makes for shorter books.

King George I's Riot Act in 1714, responding in part to the Coronation Riots attending his ascension, declares itself "An act for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies, and for the more speedy and effectual punishing the rioters." It raises a question about the riot's communicative status from the outset. It is in no small regard about declaration, about speech—it prescribes the language that must be read to declare an assembly unlawful (hence "reading the Riot Act"). With it, the term *riot* modulates decisively from its older sense of "Wanton, loose, or

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wasteful living; debauchery, dissipation, extravagance” and even “unrestrained revelry, mirth or noise” to its contemporary meaning of “a violent disturbance of the peace by an assembly or body of persons; an outbreak of active lawlessness or disorder among the populace.” Chaucer’s usage, as so often, presages the word’s modernity. “For thefte and riot, they been convertible,” he writes in “The Cook’s Tale,” noting that the master pays the price for the apprentice’s revelry.⁵ He associates the word with the overturning of social hierarchies.

Transition from riot to strike takes hold unevenly. The arrival of the strike as social fact falls somewhere between 1790 and 1842, the date of the first massive strike in England. Like many sea changes, it is as hard to recognize at first as it will prove entirely apparent in later view. It will be useful to recognize the continuity as well as the opposition, the way that new content for struggle emerges from older forms of action and thus goes through periods of ambiguity. The same might be said of the later return to riot; it is early yet. With the waning of the labor movement in the west the riot ascends, both relatively and absolutely. Inevitably, there is an interval when the two tactics coexist alongside each other. From one perspective, they seem to vie for primacy; from another, the volatility of their dual presence during this second transition provisions a revolutionary situation, one known widely and not entirely accurately by the name “1968.” The world-historical year of 1973 is the swivel, with the collapse of industrial profits signaling the onset of what should rightly be called the Long Crisis, with its recompositions of class and global division of labor that progressively undermine the possibilities for

⁵ “For thefte and riot, they been convertible.” Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, 85.

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militant labor organization in the west. By the eighties, the transition is largely complete. If this first appears as part of a more widespread closure of revolutionary frontiers—as the end of history concomitant with the exit of twentieth-century communisms—that verdict is once again open to debate. The debate is inextricably wound up with the riot's return.

Riot-strike-riot, then. But that won't quite do. Such a formulation can't help but suggest a simple oscillation, or worse, an atavistic reversion. That story has its appeals, given the affective tonalities of the present, the intimations of civilizational collapse accelerated by ecological catastrophe. Still, it's just a shape, not a theory. It is neither explanatory nor accurate. The new era of riots in many ways does not resemble its predecessor. Previous to the nineteenth century, general difficulties faced by the poor in managing subsistence—including not just bread riots but the common anti-enclosure riot—provided the occasion for social antagonism to burst forth. Notably, these events included “export riots,” episodes in which the shipping of grain out of county, especially in times of famine, was halted by concerted and coordinated efforts. By many accounts, this basic configuration of needs obtains today; positivistic studies linking food prices to riots remain common, and in some ways persuasive, particularly in low-wage nations. Nonetheless, riot after riot begins now not at the granary but at the police station, literally or figuratively, incited by the police murder of a young person with dark skin, or following on the failure of the legal apparatus to hold the police adequately responsible for their violence. The new era finds its paradigm in the Los Angeles riots of 1992, following the acquittal of the officers who were recorded beating Rodney King brutally after a traffic stop—riots which spread to numerous other cities and continued for

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five days. Increasingly, the contemporary riot transpires within a logic of racialization and takes the state rather than the economy as its direct antagonist. The riot returns not only to a changed world but changed itself.

Riot-strike-riot prime. Better. These terms provide the book's three sections. Each has not just a proper period but a proper place. For the first era of riot, the market, but even more the port; for the era of strike, the factory floor; and, for the new era of riot, square and street. To make good on this tripartite sequence, this book will need to discover both the continuity of the two eras of riots as well as their difference: the unity of a tumult in the marketplace and the often racialized upwellings directed apparently against the state. Here then is the argument, in its condensed and abstracted form, to which the remainder of the book will add both particulars and digressions, as well as a political-economic framework and a glance forward.

The Marketplace and the Factory Floor

The primary difficulty in defining the riot devolves from its profound association with violence; for many, this association is so affectively charged in one direction or another that it is difficult to dispel and in turn difficult to notice other things. No doubt many riots involve violence—perhaps the great majority, if one includes property damage in the category, as well as threats explicit or *sub voce*. It is not altogether clear that such inclusion is natural or reasonable. That property damage equals violence is not a truth but the adoption of a particular set of ideas about property, one of relatively recent vintage, involving specific identifications of humans with abstract wealth of the sort that culminate in, for example, the legal holdings that corporations are people.

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However, this insistence on the violence of the riot effectively obscures the daily, systematic, and ambient violence that stalks daily life for much of the world. The vision of a generally pacific sociality that only in exception breaks forth into violence is an imaginary accessible only to some. For others—most—social violence is the norm. The rhetoric of the violent riot becomes a device of exclusion, aimed not so much against “violence” but against specific social groups.

Moreover, across more than two centuries, strikes quite often involved violence as well: pitched battles between workers on one side and cops, scabs and mercenaries on the other, which at their zenith resembled military engagements. If one extends the category as above, violence is ubiquitous in the strike, even as a kind of defensive counterviolence. Reporting from France in 1968, the Italian poet Angelo Quattrochi noted,

Workers can threaten to smash the machinery, and the threat alone can prevent an armed intervention. Masters of the factory, their condition of dispossession is their very strength. The machines, the Capital, owned by others and by others manipulated, are now in their hands.⁶

This passage intends to distinguish the limited strike, for Quattrochi a craven and choreographed event, from the factory occupation. It is suggestive that he chose to make the distinction in that moment, peering down at a Paris where riot and strike have entered into vivid collaboration and competition, each trying to transcend not just its

⁶ Angelo Quattrochi, “What Happened,” in *The Beginning of the End: France, May 1968*, eds. Angelo Quattrochi and Tom Nairn, New York: Verso, 1998, 49.

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own but the other's limits. That said, the limited strike's gray servility is itself a particular historical development. The real situation he describes, the potential for workers to dispose of the gears of production as they see fit, is at the heart of the strike.

But this is already to have implied that we know the difference between riot and strike. If not violence, what then? E. P. Thompson, whose thought is this book's lodestone, provides the basis for an answer in his epochal "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." If this answer has gone curiously overlooked, it is almost certainly because the essay never quite formalizes the logic it makes available. Taking issue with the reductions and depoliticizing force cached within the term "bread riot," he produces a more systematic vision of the riot's political economy:

It has been suggested that the term "riot" is a blunt tool of analysis for so many particular grievances and occasions. It is also an imprecise term for describing popular actions. If we are looking for the characteristic form of direct action, we should take, not squabbles outside London bakeries, nor even the great affrays provoked by discontent with the large millers, but the "risings of the people" (most notably in 1740, 1756, 1766, 1795 and 1800) in which colliers, tanners, weavers and hosiery workers were prominent. What is remarkable about these "insurrections" is, first, their discipline, and, second, the fact that they exhibit a pattern of behaviour for whose origin we must look back several hundreds of years: which becomes more, rather than less, sophisticated in the eighteenth century; which repeats itself, seemingly spontaneously, in different parts of the country and after the passage of many quiet years. The central action in this pattern is not the sack of granaries

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and the pilfering of grain or flour but the action of “setting the price.”⁷

This is precisely the situation that will turn with the century:

Economic class-conflict in nineteenth-century England found its characteristic expression in the matter of wages; in eighteenth-century England the working people were most quickly inflamed to action by rising prices.⁸

Thompson catches the texture of deep transformation in flight, elusive as it is immanent:

We are coming to the end of one tradition, and the new tradition has scarcely emerged. In these years the alternative form of economic pressure—pressure upon wages—is becoming more vigorous; there is also something more than rhetoric behind the language of sedition—underground union organization, oaths, the shadowy “United Englishmen.” In 1812 traditional food riots overlap with Luddism. In 1816 the East Anglian laborers do not only set the prices, they also demand a minimum wage and an end to Speenhamland relief. They look forward to the very different revolt of laborers in 1830. The older form of action lingers on into the 1840s and even later: it was especially deeply rooted in the Southwest. But in the new territories of the industrial revolution it passed by stages into other forms of action.⁹

7 E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present*, no. 50, Feb. 1971, 107–8.

8 *Ibid.*, 79.

9 *Ibid.*, 128–9.

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Prices and wages, this is the pairing. One the measure of the marketplace, the other that of the factory floor and the mine, of agricultural labor once commonly held lands and subsistence farming have gone down amid blood and fire. R. H. Tawney makes much the same point, in somewhat different terms:

The economy of the mediaeval borough was one in which consumption held somewhat the same primacy in the public mind, as the undisputed arbiter of economic effort, as the nineteenth century attached to profits.¹⁰

But wages are themselves a special kind of price. Reminding ourselves of this, the formula becomes clear: In the first instance, *riot is the setting of prices for market goods, while strike is the setting of prices for labor power*. This is the first level or horizon of analysis required for understanding the history of riot, which we might call the practical level. The political practice in its fullest dimension is that of reproduction—of the household and the individual, of the local community. Around the turn from eighteenth to nineteenth century, the matter of reproduction shifts its center of gravity from one location to another, one struggle to the next.

Consumer and worker are not two opposed, much less successive, classes, it should go without saying. Rather, they are two momentary roles within the collective activity required to reproduce a single class: the emergent modern proletariat, who must make their way within the wage-commodity nexus. If one moment takes precedence over the other, this speaks to the given degree of technical and social development within that nexus, and the position

¹⁰ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London: Harcourt Brace, 1926, 33.

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the proletarian holds in relation. In the scene of riot, those setting prices in the marketplace may be laborers (note Thompson's "colliers, tanners, weavers and hosiery workers") but this is not the immediate fact that has brought them there. This recognition allows a refinement of our definitions.

The strike is the form of collective action that

- 1) struggles to set the price of labor power (or the conditions of labor, which is much the same thing: the amount of misery that can be purchased by the pound);
- 2) features workers appearing *in their role as workers*;
- 3) unfolds in the context of capitalist production, featuring its interruption at the source via the downing of tools, cordoning of the factory floor, etc.

The riot is the form of collective action that

- 1) struggles to set the price of market goods (or their availability, which is much the same thing, for the question is similarly one of access);
- 2) features participants with no necessary kinship but their dispossession;
- 3) unfolds in the context of consumption, featuring the interruption of commercial circulation.

This apparatus is simple but powerful, and suffices for the span first surveyed by our scholars, well into the twentieth century. It nonetheless poses problems for the present. The characteristic struggles of *riot prime*, the period beginning in the sixties alongside the strike's last flourishing, and continuing into the present, cannot finally be understood adequately within the framework of price-setting, even in

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Thompson's expanded sense. But neither can it be understood without it. It is here that we will require a second level or horizon: that of periodization, concerned precisely with the degree of capital's technical and social development referred to above, in all its eloquent and ambiguous undulations.

Circulation-Production-Circulation Prime

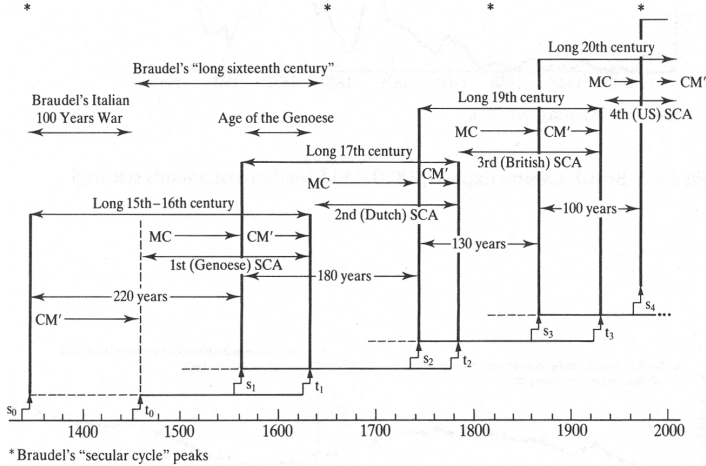
We have noticed already that the first transition, *riot-strike*, corresponds both historically and logically to the Industrial Revolution and its extension and intensification of the wage relation at the beginning of Britain's long nineteenth century. The second transition, *strike-riot prime*, corresponds in turn to the period of "hegemony unraveling" at the end of the United States' long twentieth century. A rise and a fall. A certain shapeliness amid the mess and noise of history delivering us now to the autumn of empire known variously by the terms *late capitalism*, *financialization*, *post-Fordism*, and so forth—that dilating litany racing to keep pace with our protean disaster.

These datings are drawn from the schema of Giovanni Arrighi, who describes four "long centuries and systemic cycles of accumulation."

"The main feature of the temporal profile of historical capitalism sketched here is the similar structure of all long centuries," notes Arrighi.¹¹ The recurrent structure is a tripartite sequence beginning with a financial expansion originally led by merchant capital; material expansion "of the entire world-economy" led by manufacturing or more broadly industrial capital, in which capital accumulates systemically; and when that has reached its limits, a final

11 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*, London: Verso, 1996, 219–20.

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financial expansion. During this phase, no real recovery of accumulation is possible, but only more and less desperate strategies of deferral. Historically, the financial sector of the leading economy has in such a situation found a rising industrial power to soak up its excess capital, thus bank-rolling its own replacement. This new hegemon will form on necessarily expanded grounds, able to restore accumulation on a global scale but by the same token beginning from a position closer to its own limits for expansion—thus Arrighi's overlapping cycles, broadening and quickening as they go, the series of transfers once known as *translatio imperii*.

This schematization has been occasion for various inquiries about the transition to capitalism often found under the heading "Commerce or Capitalism?" Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Woods and others have argued that the development of extensive trading networks and accompanying social reorganization should not be confused with capitalism proper, and particularly not with capital's "relentless and systematic development of the productive forces," which cannot be said to have started much before

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the British cycle and industrial takeoff.¹² It is precisely this distinction that animates the argument herein. Markets inarguably predate capitalism and continue within it; they become part of capitalism's constitution only once they are transformed by the elaboration of the wage-commodity nexus and subjected to the disciplines of surplus-value production. This tracks the first transition, *riot-strike*.

And yet it is hard to dispute Arrighi's finding that protocapitalist commercial empires followed much the same developmental parabola as their more realized versions. The two great capitalist empires of Britain and the United States preserve and transmute the developmental forms, filling them with new content. Within the spiraling reach of capital, each cycle features a phase dominated by the logic of production, here meaning the valorization of commodities, which Arrighi generalizes as M-C. Bracketing this are phases dominated by circulation, for such is the character of merchant or finance capital, which Arrighi defines as the realization of values, or C-M. It is never either/or. Both processes must be in conjoined flight or capital would cease to move altogether (and immobile capital is not capital at all). The description here concerns the balance of forces within the expanded circuit of capital.

We have therefore a periodization to match our practices: *riot-strike-riot prime* maps onto phases of *circulation-production-circulation*. True, the period bracketing the beginning of the twentieth century was for Britain, still at the time the leading capitalist economy, a financial or circulation-centered period. Here, the reasoning of Arrighi's overlap-based schema comes clear. While the United States experienced its own "Long Depression" corresponding to Britain's economic shift at the heel of the nineteenth

¹² Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, London: Verso, 2009, 13.

century, it nonetheless oversaw in this period a notable expansion of production driven by a second Industrial Revolution able to counterbalance the British decline. Our current phase of circulation, however, lacks much evidence of such systemic counterbalance; for all the attention paid to China's role as the new workshop to the world, e.g., it is already shedding industrial labor.¹³

Indeed, this gestures toward what is unique, at least provisionally, about our moment within a world-systems frame. The spiraling reach of long centuries may have run out of room to expand; reformation on a larger scale does not seem to be in the cards (though we should not too easily dismiss capital's ability to rescue itself from seemingly total crisis). Productive capital held sway from, say, 1784 to 1973. It may yet again. For the moment, this seems uncertain. Far from underwriting a rising hegemon, the United States in its decline is—despite its hypertrophied financial sector—ending its run as a massive debtor nation. It is now possible to argue that, even at a global or systemic level, capital finds itself in a phase of circulation not being met by rising production elsewhere—a distinct phase we will inevitably have to name *circulation prime*.

Accordingly, the British and U.S. regimes can be melded into a single metacycle following the sequence *circulation-production-circulation prime*. Again, this requires a certain heuristic smoothing of the capitalist world-system's volatile trajectory. It is an argument, not a plain truth. Still, we think it is a suggestive one: it is possible to map Arrighi's three phases onto Brenner's periodization of capital in what can be seen as an "arc of accumulation," at least in the west, rising from commerce with the Industrial Revolution

13 Alan Freeman, "Investing in Civilisation: What the State Can Do in a Crisis" in *Bailouts and Bankruptcies*, eds., Julie Guard and Wayne Antony, eds., Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2009.

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and descending into finance with widespread deindustrialization, with no reversal in view. The coeval sequence of *riot-strike-riot prime* becomes therefore a history of capitalism and an exposition of its current form, of the contradictions of the present.

Riot and Crisis

For the return of the riot to serve as testimony about the status of capitalism as such, there must be more than a coincidence between the two sequences. There must be a theoretical enchainment. This is the third and final level or analytical horizon, that of history itself, by which we mean the dialectical twining of lived struggles with the compulsions of capital's self-moving motion, understood as a real movement of social existence. What within the objective motion of capital joins riot to circulation, strike to production, and moves us from one to the next?

This question has already been given a preliminary answer. Phases led by material production will issue forth struggles within production, over the price of labor power; phases led by circulation will see struggles in the marketplace, over the price of goods. This is a synchronic account, lacking a dynamic that drives us from phase to phase; moreover, it does not yet address the peculiarities of *riot prime* and *circulation prime*. That requires a swift pass through the Marxian theory of crisis.¹⁴

Value, for Marx, has both a qualitative existence as a social relation and a quantitative existence in exchange

¹⁴ It is frequently noted that Marx did not leave behind a completed theory of crisis. His value theory in general, however, provides the logical basis for an elaborated theory. For the best summary of this, see Anwar Shaikh, "Introduction to the History of Crisis Theories," *US Capitalism in Crisis*, New York: URPE, 1978.

value.¹⁵ The exchange value borne by a commodity allows for surplus value, the “invisible essence of capital,” valorized in production and realized as profit in circulation. Circulation, Marx is at pains to decipher, can never itself be the source of new value for capital as a whole. The idea that it could receives an extended and scorn-laced treatment in *Capital* that ends:

However much we twist and turn, the final conclusion remains the same. If equivalents are exchanged, no surplus value results, and if nonequivalents are exchanged, we still have no surplus-value. Circulation, or the exchange of commodities, creates no value.¹⁶

These categories are endlessly troubled, not least by the limits of “circulation.” The extraordinary development of transport, one of the hallmarks of our time, would seem at first to fit the bill, circulating products toward realizing as profit the surplus value valorized elsewhere. The change of location, some argue contrarily, increases the value of a commodity. In its most restricted sense, “pure circulation costs” might be limited to activities that make nothing but exchange itself, the abstract transfer of title: sales, bookkeeping, and the like. Moreover, financialization and “globalization” (by which we mean the extension toward planetary limits of logistical networks and processes, coordinated by advances in information technologies) should also be understood as temporal and spatial strategies respectively to internalize new value inputs from elsewhere

¹⁵ For the most eloquent gloss of this portion of Marx’s theory, see I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value*, trans. Fredy Perlman and Milos Samardzija, New York: Black Rose, 1990, 120–21.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, London: Penguin, 1992, 266.

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and elsewhen. But this can only affirm the proposition that the current phase in our cycle of accumulation is defined by the collapse of value production at the core of the world-system; it is for this reason that capital's center of gravity shifts toward circulation, borne by the troika of Toyotaization, information technology, and finance.

Here, practical facts prove illuminating. As Brenner notes:

Between 1973 and the present, economic performance in the US, western Europe, and Japan has, by every standard macroeconomic indicator, deteriorated, business cycle by business cycle, decade by decade (with the exception of the second half of the 1990s).¹⁷

Global GDP growth from the fifties through the seventies remained higher than 4 percent; since then, it has rested at 3 percent or lower, sometimes much lower.¹⁸ Even the best of times during the Long Crisis have been by and large worse than the worst of times in the preceding long boom. Were we to stipulate that transport may be part of valorization as well as realization, we would nonetheless confront the fact that the great build-outs of global transport and the acceleration of turnover time since the seventies are concurrent with the retreat of industrial production in the leading capitalist nations. This lockstep march is in turn concomitant with exactly what value theory projects from a shift toward circulation: less value production, fewer systemic profits. By any measure, shipping and finance do not seem to have arrested the stagnation and decline in

¹⁷ Robert Brenner, "What's Good for Goldman Sachs," prologue to Spanish edition of *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, Madrid: Akal, 2009. Made available to the author in typescript, 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

global profitability. Borrowing a term from Gilles Chatelet, we might call their collaboration “cybermercantilism,” cognate to the preindustrial mode in which no amount of buying cheap and selling dear or selling more and more can lead to expansion.

But this is not to say they have not bolstered the profits of individual firms, which can gain competitive advantage by decreasing their own circulation costs in a game of beggar-your-neighbor for the age of information technology. Similarly, firms can enter into schemes that recirculate and redistribute already extant value, skimming a portion as it passes. Without going too far into the Marxological maze, we can affirm rather uncontroversially about the period in question that capital, faced with greatly diminished returns in the traditionally productive sectors, goes looking for profit beyond the confines of the factory—in the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate), along the lanes laid out by global logistical networks—yet finds there no ongoing solution to the crisis that pushed it from production in the first place. Instead, ever more frenetic churning, more elaborate schemes, larger bubbles, bigger busts.

In a motion of dialectical despair, the very thing that has sent capital into the fratricidal zero-sum sphere of circulation does much the same for a rising portion of humanity. Crisis and unemployment, the two great themes of *Capital*, are both expressions of capital’s tragic flaw: that, in seeking profit, it must destroy profit’s wellspring, careering into objective limits in its unrelenting drive for accumulation and productivity. The *Grundrisse* offers the most concise formulation:

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits

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labor time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labor time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary.¹⁹

The “moving contradiction” is nothing but the law of value itself in motion, presenting itself in various forms. One might see it as the contradiction between value and price, the measures of production and circulation respectively—which will turn out to be as well the contradiction between capital as a whole and individual capitals. The latter do not concern themselves with the overall health of the capitalist system, nor are they compelled to do so. They are compelled, rather, to outcompete other capitals in their sector. So, whereas the need to expand, to generate new value leading to systemic accumulation, is an existential absolute from the standpoint of all capital, individual capitalists do not think in terms of value and accumulation. They measure their existence in price and wealth, and are compelled to seek profit wherever it may be found, regardless of the consequences for the whole.

No less is this unitary phenomenon a contradiction between absolute and relative surplus value. Intercapitalist struggles to economize all processes iteratively replace labor power with more efficient machines and organizational forms, and so over time increase the ratio of constant to variable capital, dead to living labor, expelling the source of absolute surplus value in the struggle for its relative form.

Crisis is development of these contradictions to the breaking point. This features not a shortage of money but

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, 706.

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its surplus. Accrued profit lies fallow, unable to convert itself into capital, for there is no longer any seductive reason to invest in further production. The factories go quiet. Seeking wages elsewhere, displaced workers discover that labor-saving automation has generalized itself across the various lines. Now unused labor piles up cheek by jowl with unused capacity. This is the production of nonproduction.

Here, we have returned under somewhat different cover to the matter of class, in the form of what Marx calls “surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labor. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*”²⁰ As *Endnotes* points out in the most incisive treatment of this issue: “This surplus population need not find itself completely ‘outside’ capitalist social relations. Capital may not need these workers, but they still need to work. They are thus forced to offer themselves up for the most abject forms of wage slavery in the form of petty production and services—identified with informal and often illegal markets of direct exchange arising alongside failures of capitalist production.”²¹

It cannot be surprising that this surplus population is racialized across the west. Capital’s capacity for profit has always required the production and reproduction of social difference; in slack labor markets, the apparatus of wage differentials makes the leap from quantitative to qualitative. Alongside the “jobless recoveries” since

20 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, 798 (emphasis in original).

21 “Misery and Debt,” *Endnotes* 2, 2010, 30, fn15.

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1980 that lend support to underlying theories of growing surplus, the unemployment rate among, for example, black Americans has consistently approached double the going average, if not higher, arranging among other things a vast expansion of the prison-industrial complex to manage this human surplus. The process of racialization is itself intimately entangled with the production of surplus populations, each functioning to constitute the other according to varying logics of profound exclusion. As Chris Chen argues:

The rise of the anti-black U.S. carceral state from the 1970s onward exemplifies rituals of state and civilian violence which enforce the racialization of wageless life, and the racial ascription of wagelessness. From the point of view of capital, “race” is renewed not only through persistent racialized wage differentials, or the kind of occupational segregation posited by earlier “split labor market” theories of race, but through the racialization of unwaged surplus or superfluous populations from Khartoum to the slums of Cairo.²²

This operates in turn at the level of the contemporary riot, a surplus rebellion that is both marked by and marks out race. Hence a final distinction from the strike, which in modern form exists within a legal framework (even if this is often enough exceeded). Here, we begin to understand the kind of ideological work being done by the insistence on the peculiar illegitimacy of riot. The illegality of *riot prime* is among other things the illegality of the racialized body.

²² Chris Chen, “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality,” *Endnotes* 3, 2013, 217.

Circulation Struggles

A population, then, whose very being—its possibility for reproduction—is recentered by economic reorganization from the sphere of production into that of circulation. This is not “consumer society” in the popular sense, “the definitive victory of materialism in a universal worship of the commodity-fetish.”²³ But it is a consumer society nonetheless: surplus population confronted by the old problem of consumption without direct access to the wage. Not absolutely, not evenly across the globe, but enough. We speak of tendential shifts. When the basis for capital’s survival shifts sufficiently to circulation, and the basis for the survival of the immiserated shifts much the same, there we shall find *riot prime*. It thus names the social reorganization, the period in which it holds sway, and the leading form of collective action that corresponds to this situation.

It is a somewhat technical way of talking about exclusion and immiseration, doubtless, this use of categories from classical political economy and its critique. The virtue of this language lies in its power to explain the linkage between *riot* and *riot prime*—to disclose that bread riot and race riot, those paired misnomers, retain a deep unity. In a summary formulation, crisis signals a shift of capital’s center of gravity into circulation, both theoretically and practically, and riot is in the last instance to be understood as a circulation struggle, of which price-setting and the surplus rebellion are distinct, though related, forms.

The new proletariat, which must now (in keeping with the original sense of the word) expand to include surplus populations among those “without reserves,” finds itself in

23 Tom Nairn, “Why It Happened,” in *The Beginning of the End: France, May 1968*, eds. Angelo Quattrochi and Tom Nairn, New York: Verso, 1998, 136.

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a changed world. We have already detailed some of the changes. The situation can be limned as an epochal chiasmus. In 1700, police as we recognize them did not exist; the occasional bailiff or beadle watched over the marketplace. At the same time, most of life's daily necessities were made locally. In short, the state was far and the economy near. In 2015, the state is near and the economy far. Production is aerosolized; commodities are assembled and delivered across global logistics chains. Even basic foodstuffs are likely to originate a continent away. Meanwhile, the standing domestic army of the state is always at hand—progressively militarized, on the pretext of making war on drugs and terror. *Riot prime* cannot help but heave itself against the state; there is no way not to.

The spectacular encounter with the state should not, however, suggest that there is no directly economic form to the contemporary riot, in addition to its underlying political-economic content. The two manifest forms are economic destruction and looting, one often following on the other in a conjoined negation of market exchange and market logic. Despite the universal appearance of this aspect of the riot, it is unfailingly treated as a deviation from, and compromise of, the initial grievance that might have granted the riot legitimacy. What ethical claim could outright theft possibly make? That this seems at all mysterious points to a moment of ideological closure and supreme historical ignorance. Looting is not the moment of falsehood but of truth echoing across centuries of riot: a version of price-setting in the marketplace, albeit at price zero. It is a desperate turn to the question of reproduction, though one dramatically limited by the structure of capital within which it initially operates.

If the riot raises the question of reproduction, it does so as negation. It stands as the reversal of labor's fate in late

modernity. Labor's historical power has rested on a growing productive sector and its ability to seize a share of expanding surplus. Since the turn of the seventies, labor has been reduced to defensive negotiations, compelled to preserve the firms able to supply wages, affirming the domination of capital in return for its own preservation. The worker appearing *as worker* in the period of crisis confronts a situation in which "the very fact of acting as a class appears as an external constraint."²⁴ This dynamic, which we might call the affirmation trap, has become a generalized social form and conceptual framework, the rational irrationality of our moment. The riot's very disorder can be understood as the immediate negation of this.

Such struggles, in turn, cannot help but confront capital where it is most vulnerable. There is no need to impute a kind of consciousness to this latent form of conflict with capital. Compelled into the space of circulation, the riot finds itself where capital has increasingly shifted its resources. The riot's more or less simultaneous arrival on the freeways of St. Louis, Los Angeles, Nashville, and more than a dozen other cities is as decisive a verdict on the circulation thesis as could be imagined. Easy enough to say that such an interruption is largely symbolic: How much of capital is elsewhere, globally distributed, resilient, dematerialized? The freeway takeovers of late November 2014 are nonetheless an index of the real situation in which struggle will take place. They demonstrate moreover the limits of the various categories of riot. They are self-evidently descendants of the premodern export riots. No less are they siblings to the 2011 port shutdown in Oakland and the

24 Théorie Communiste, "Communization in the Present Tense," in *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, ed. Benjamin Noys, New York: Minor Compositions, 2011, 41.

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long No-TAV blockade of the planned Susa Valley tunnel. To recognize this is to recognize that the riot is a privileged tactic insofar as it is exemplary of the larger category we designate “circulation struggles”: the riot, the blockade, the occupation and, at the far horizon, the commune.

“We are coming to the end of one tradition, and the new tradition has scarcely emerged,” Thompson wrote about the transition of two centuries ago.²⁵ Even the bourgeois press catches a glimpse of this: In 2011, *Time* magazine featured a Tottenham rioter on its cover, tracksuit and mask, flames behind, with the headline THE DECLINE AND FALL OF EUROPE (AND MAYBE THE WEST).²⁶ Something has ended, or should have ended; everyone can feel it. It is a sort of interregnum. A miserable lull, backlit everywhere by the sense of declension and fires flaring across the planetary terrain of struggle. The songs on the radio are the same—awful, astonishing. They promise that nothing has changed, but they never keep their promises, do they? The fissures in the organization of society that has obtained for some while widen weekly. And yet this anxious persistence, this uneasy suspension. Will there be a restoration? Greater catastrophe? Which should we prefer? This is the tonality of the time of riots.

25 Thompson, “Moral Economy,” 128.

26 *Newsweek*, August 22, 2011.